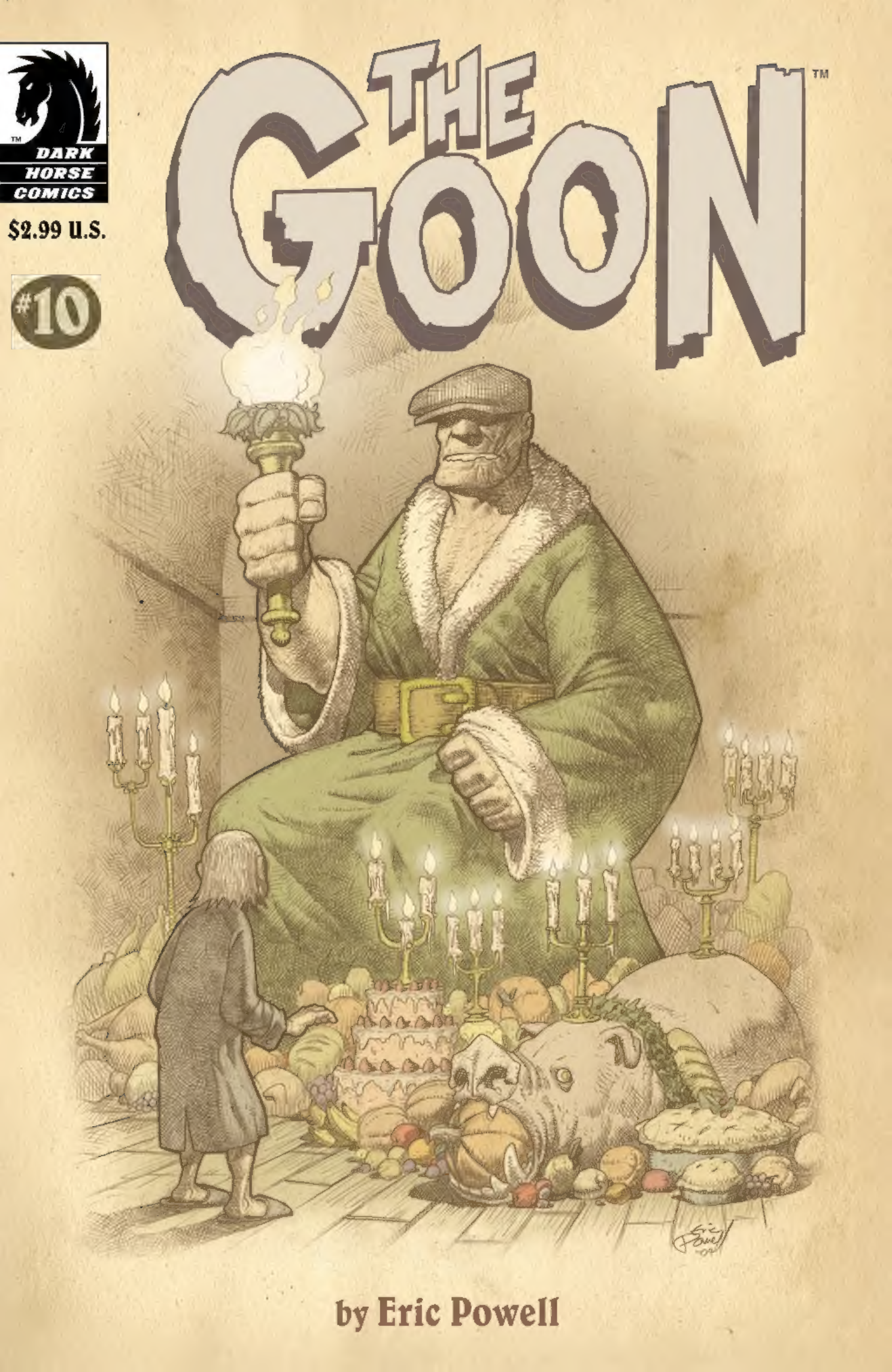
DARK HORSE COMICS
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#10
THE GOON
by Eric Powell

The nameless man, the zombie priest, had come to town to build a gang from the undead. But even the undead fear...

THE GOON™

by Eric Powell

color assists by
Robin Powell

Jimmy Turtle and the Legendary Boxcar of Well-Made Ladies' Shoes

written by **Thomas Lennon**

with spot illustrations by **Eric Powell**

edited by **Matt Dryer** designed by **Amy Arendts**
published by **Mike Richardson**

Special thanks to founding member of the comedy group *The State* and cast member of *Reno-911*, Thomas Lennon for his hilarious contribution to this issue.

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THE CAST OF THE GOON WOULD LIKE TO PRESENT...

CHARLES DICKENS'

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

A COMPLETE BASTARDIZATION OF A PIECE OF CLASSIC HOLIDAY LITERATURE

THE NAMELESS MAN
AS
EBENEZER SCROOGE

MERLE
AS
BOB CRATCHIT

DR. HIERONYMOUS ALLOY
AS
JACOB MARLEY

THE MUDD BROTHERS
AS
THE COLLECTORS FOR THE POOR

FRANKY
AS
THE GHOST OF
CHRISTMAS PAST

GOON
AS
THE GHOST OF
CHRISTMAS PRESENT

PEACHES VALENTINE
AS
TINY TIM

AS
THE GHOST OF
CHRISTMAS FUTURE

MARLEY WAS DEAD. THERE IS NO DOUBT WHATSOEVER ABOUT THAT.
Marley & Scrooge
CRATCHIT!!
SIR?
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?!
I'M STOKIN' UP THIS FIRE, BOY! IT'S COLDER THAN A POLAR BEAR'S BUTT IN HERE!
D'OW!!
WHAP!
GIVE ME THAT! COAL COSTS MONEY, CRATCHIT!
PERHAPS IF YOU PAID MORE ATTENTION TO THE WORK THAT I HANDSOMELY PAY YOU FOR, YOU WOULDN'T MIND THE COLD!
"HANDSOMELY PAID," MY EYE! MY BEST DRAWERS GOTS HOLES IN THE CROTCH!
AND SPEAKIN' OF GETTIN' PAID, TOMORROW IS CHRISTMAS. I EXPECT PAID-HOLIDAY VACATION!
IF I WAS TO STOP HALF A CROWN FOR IT, YOU'D THINK YOURSELF ILL USED, I'LL BE BOUND! FORGET IT!

BESIDES, DON'T YOU HAVE AN INVALID CHILD THAT NEEDS DESPERATE MEDICAL ATTENTION? DON'T YOU THINK YOU SHOULD WORK ON CHRISTMAS FOR ITS SAKE?
SCREW THAT, I'M MAKIN' MERRY! A.K.A.-- GETTIN' REAL DRUNK!
DINGLE-DING!
WE IS LOOKIN' FOR THE PROPRIETOR OF 'IS FINE ESTABLISHMENT.
I'M MR. SCROOGE.
AH, MERRY CHRISTMAS TO YA, MISTA SCROOGE.
MERRY CHRISTMAS?!
IF I COULD WORK MY WILL, EVERY IDIOT WHO GOES ABOUT WITH MERRY CHRISTMAS ON HIS LIPS SHOULD BE BOILED WITH HIS OWN PUDDING, AND BURIED WITH A STAKE OF HOLLY THROUGH HIS HEART, HE SHOULD!
HE'S A SICK LITTLE BUGGER. LET'S BREAK 'IS LEGS!
NAH, WE GOTS TA GET MONEY FOR 'EM POOR PEOPLES FIRST. BUSINESS BEFORE PLEASURE.

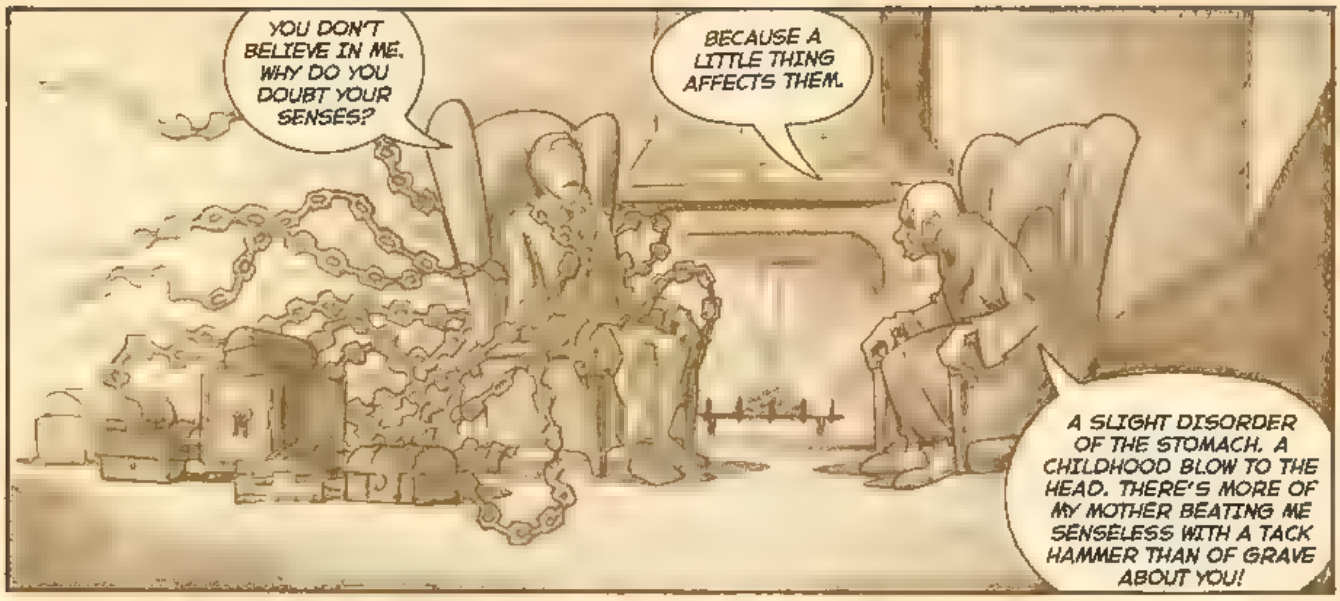
AT THIS FESTIVE SEASON OF THE YEAR, SIR, IT IS MORE THAN USUALLY DESIRABLE THAT WE OUGHT MAKE SOME PROVISION FOR THE POOR AND DESTITUTE, WHO SUFFER GREATLY.
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS ARE IN WANT OF COMMON COMFORTS, SIR. WHAT CAN WE PUT YOU DOWN FOR?
HAVE YOU NO SHOTGUN SHELLS?
UH, YEAH, AS A MATTER OF FACT, WE GOTS QUITE A BIT OF SHOTGUN SHELLS.
AND WHAT ABOUT THE RIVERS?
YEP, THERE'S A BIG RIVER UP THE WAY THERE.
THEN SHOOT THE FAST ONES AND DROWN THE SLOW ONES!
SLAM!
AND STAY OUT!

SO... DO WE GO GET OUR SHOTGUN SHELLS?
>SIGH< YEAH, I RECKON SO.

SCROOOOGE!

BOOM!
BOOM!
BOOM!
BOOM!
BOOM!
BOOM!

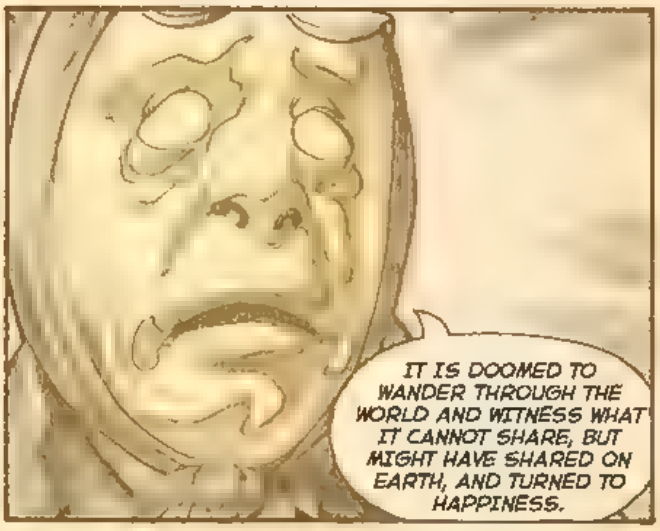
WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH ME?!
MUCH.
WHO ARE YOU?!
ASK ME WHO I WAS.
WHO WERE YOU, THEN?!
IN LIFE I WAS YOUR PARTNER, JACOB MARLEY.
CAN YOU-- CAN YOU SIT DOWN?
I CAN.
DO IT THEN.


YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN ME. WHY DO YOU DOUBT YOUR SENSES?
BECAUSE A LITTLE THING AFFECTS THEM.
A SLIGHT DISORDER OF THE STOMACH. A CHILDHOOD BLOW TO THE HEAD. THERE'S MORE OF MY MOTHER BEATING ME SENSELESS WITH A TACK HAMMER THAN OF GRAVE ABOUT YOU!

AAAAAAAAH!

MERCY! DREADFUL APPARITION, WHY DO YOU TROUBLE ME?

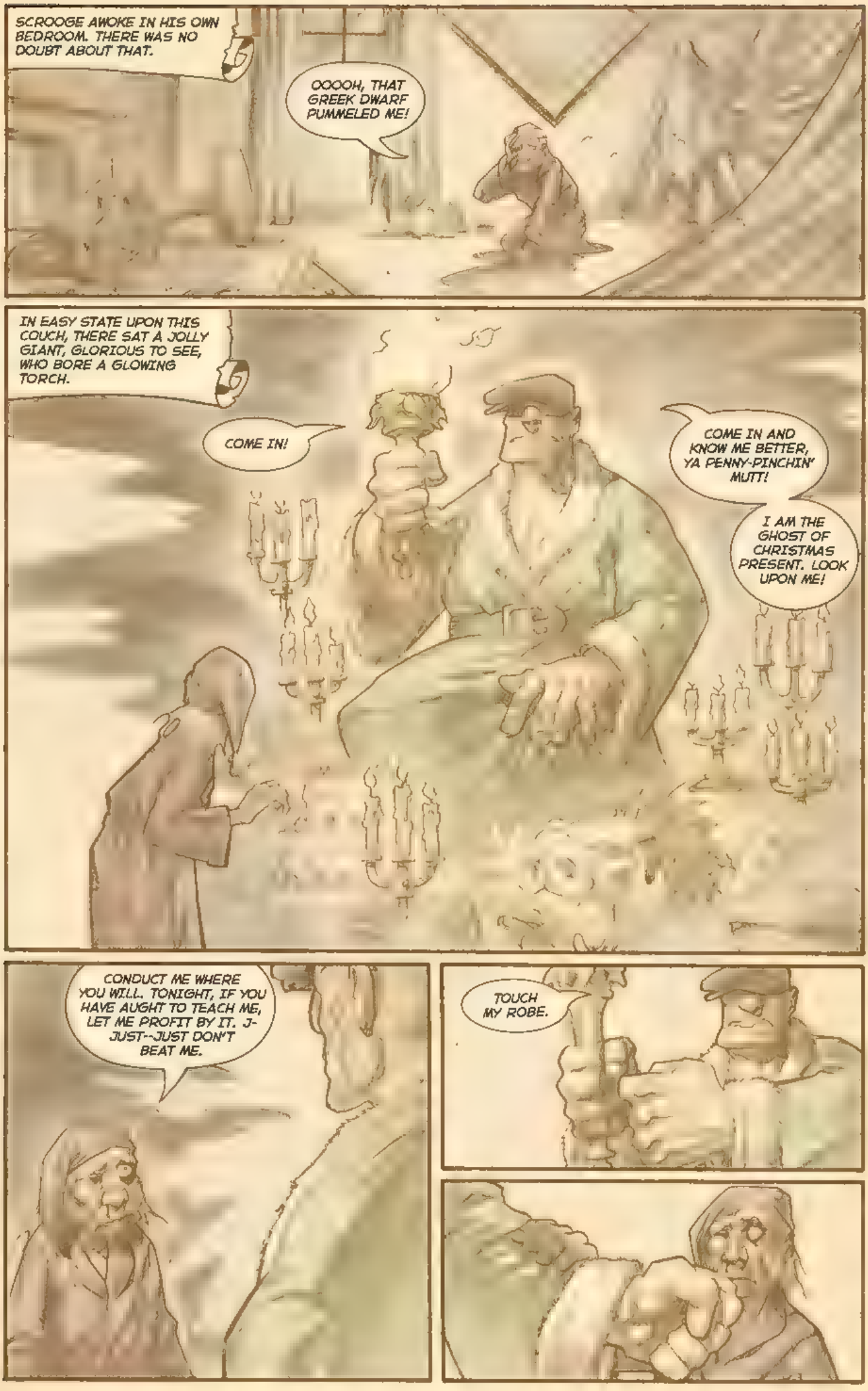
IT IS REQUIRED OF EVERY MAN THAT THE SPIRIT WITHIN HIM SHOULD WALK ABROAD AMONG HIS FELLOW MEN, AND TRAVEL FAR AND WIDE--AND IF THAT SPIRIT GOES NOT FORTH IN LIFE, IT IS CONDEMNED TO DO SO AFTER DEATH.


IT IS DOOMED TO WANDER THROUGH THE WORLD AND WITNESS WHAT IT CANNOT SHARE, BUT MIGHT HAVE SHARED ON EARTH, AND TURNED TO HAPPINESS.

YOU ARE FETTERED--TELL ME WHY?
I WEAR THE CHAIN I FORGED IN LIFE. I MADE IT LINK BY LINK, AND YARD BY YARD--IS ITS PATTERN STRANGE TO YOU?
OR WOULD YOU KNOW THE WEIGHT AND LENGTH OF THE STRONG COIL YOU BEAR YOURSELF? IT WAS AS HEAVY AND AS LONG AS THIS SEVEN CHRISTMAS EVES AGO. YOU HAVE LABORED ON IT SINCE. IT IS A PONDEROUS CHAIN!
BUT YOU WERE ALWAYS A GOOD MAN OF BUSINESS, JACOB.
BUSINESS! MANKIND WAS MY BUSINESS! THE DEALINGS OF MY TRADE WERE BUT A DROP OF WATER IN THE COMPREHENSIVE OCEAN OF MY BUSINESS!
HEAR ME! MY TIME HERE IS NEARLY GONE. I AM HERE TONIGHT TO WARN YOU THAT YOU HAVE YET A CHANCE OF ESCAPING MY FATE.
YOU WILL BE HAUNTED BY THREE SPIRITS. EXPECT THE FIRST WHEN THE BELL TOLLS ONE. LOOK TO SEE ME NO MORE--AND, FOR YOUR SAKE, REMEMBER WHAT HAS PASSED BETWEEN US!

BONG!
LIGHT FLASHED UP IN THE ROOM IN AN INSTANT, AND THE CURTAINS OF HIS BED WERE DRAWN ASIDE. SCROOGE FOUND HIMSELF FACE TO FACE WITH THE UNEARTHLY VISITOR WHO DREW THEM. IT WAS A STRANGE FIGURE--LIKE A CHILD, YET NOT SO LIKE A CHILD AS LIKE AN OLD MAN.
ARE YOU THE SPIRIT, SIR, WHOSE COMING WAS FORETOLD TO ME?
YEAH, YEAH, I'M THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST! NOW GET YOUR GREEDY, WRINKLED BUTT OUTTA THAT BED BEFORE I SLUG YA IN THE MOUTH!

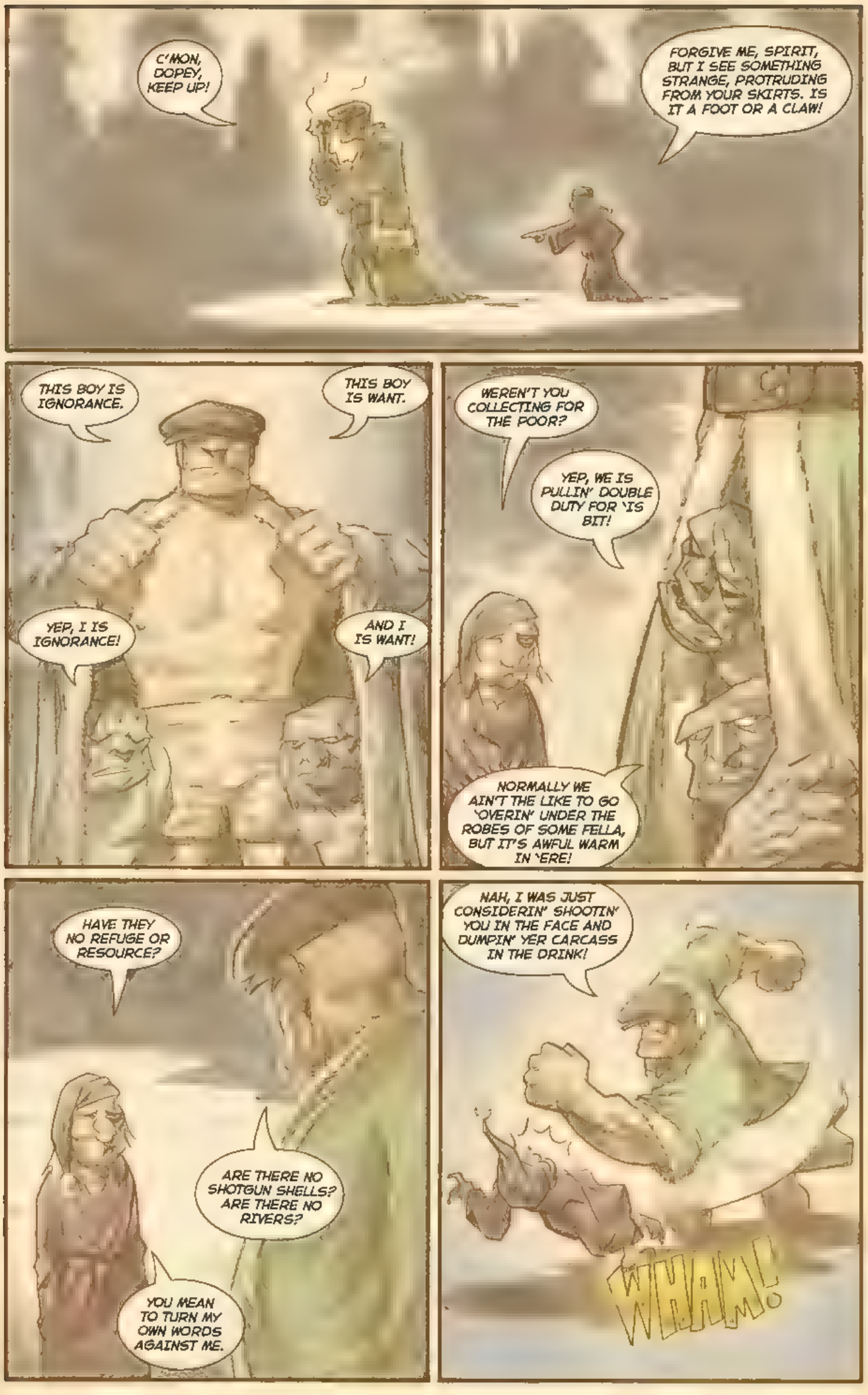
SAYS HERE I'M SUPPOSED TO TAKE YOU BACK IN THE PAST AND SHOW YOU YOUR WASTED YOUTH... SCREW THAT CRAP! I GOT THINGS TA DO!
SCROOGE
FILES
YOU GOTTA BE KIDDIN' ME! YOU TURNED DOWN THIS?!
SHE WAS A DOWERLESS GIRL WHO WOULD HAVE BROUGHT NOTHING TO THE MARRIAGE.
SMACK!
KNUCKLE UP, YA OLD FART! A MAN THAT THROWS ASIDE A LOOKER LIKE THAT FOR A FEW BUCKS NEEDS HIS CLOCK CLEANED!
CRASH!
AHHH!
POW!
SMASH!


SCROOGE AWOKE IN HIS OWN BEDROOM. THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT.
OOOOH, THAT GREEK DWARF PUMMELED ME!
IN EASY STATE UPON THIS COUCH, THERE SAT A JOLLY GIANT, GLORIOUS TO SEE, WHO BORE A GLOWING TORCH.
COME IN!
COME IN AND KNOW ME BETTER, YA PENNY-PINCHIN' MUTT!
I AM THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT. LOOK UPON ME!
CONDUCT ME WHERE YOU WILL. TONIGHT, IF YOU HAVE AUGHT TO TEACH ME, LET ME PROFIT BY IT. J-JUST--JUST DON'T BEAT ME.
TOUCH MY ROBE.

WHERE ARE WE, SPIRIT?
THIS IS THE HOME OF YOUR CLERK! THE ONE YOU PAY IN RANCID MEAT!
IT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE LIKES OF HIM!
DON'T SASS ME, BOY!
CLANG!
NOW GET IN THAT HOUSE!
AW, WHAT'S THE MATTER? CAN'T YOU GO THROUGH WALLS LIKE A GHOST?
WHAM!
WHAT'S THAT LIKE, SLAPPIN' YER FACE UP AGAINST A BRICK LIKE THAT? HUH?
I WOULDN'T KNOW, SEEIN' AS HOW I'M A GHOST.
WHAM!

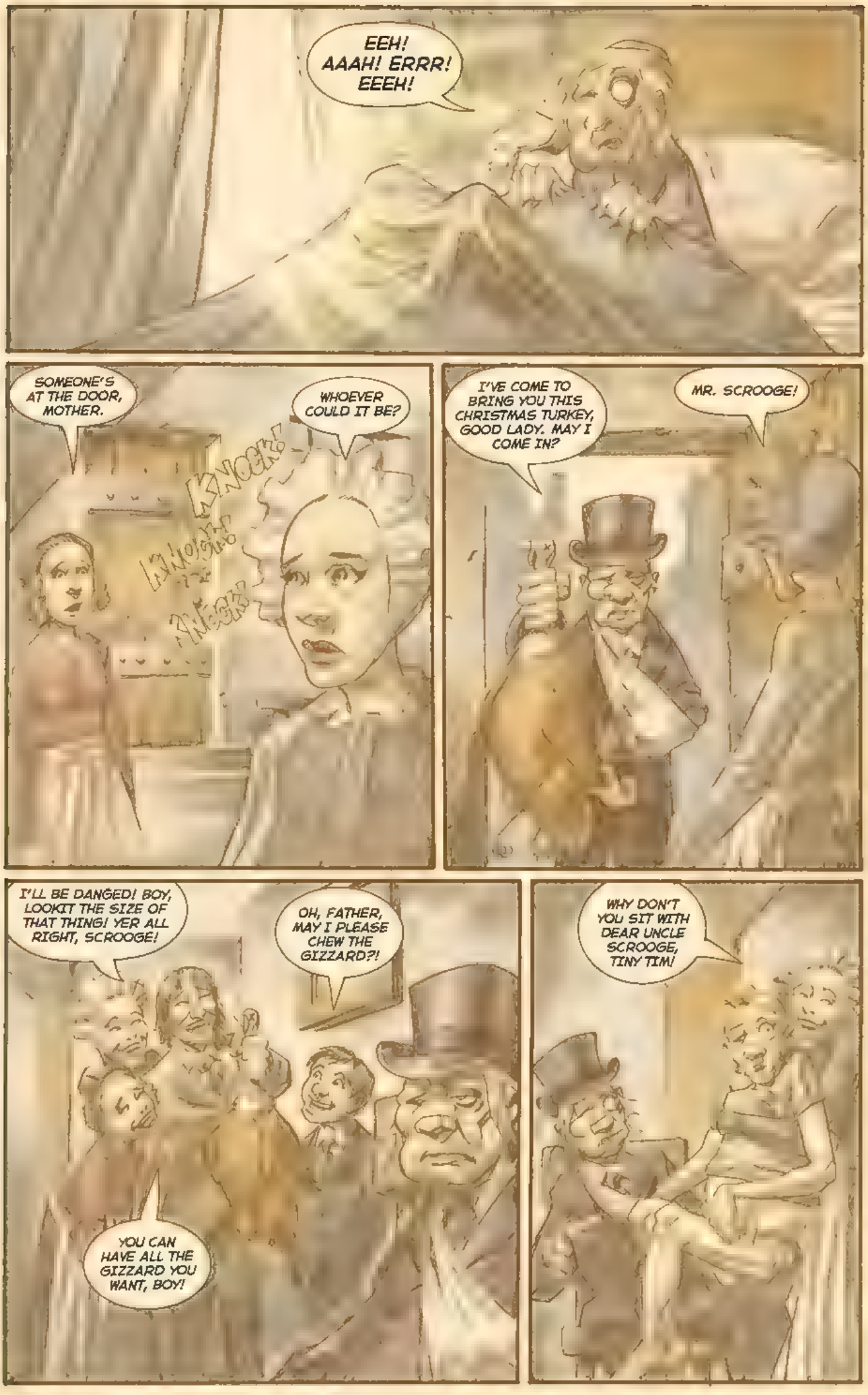
OH, MOTHER, WHY CAN'T WE HAVE A CHRISTMAS GOOSE?
YOUR FATHER SPENT ALL OF HIS WAGES ON GIN AGAIN, DEAR.
DOD BESSUS EBEY UN!!
QUIET, TINY TIM, YOU'LL WAKE FATHER!
DOD BESSUS EBEY UN!! DOD BESSUS EBEY UN!! DOD BESSUS EBEY UN!!
LOOK AT THAT POOR, FILTH-COVERED SIMPLETON! HE OUGHTA BE IN SOME KINDA HOME BEING NEGLECTED! NOT HERE BEING A BURDEN ON THESE POOR PEOPLE! WHY AIN'T YOU PUTTIN' THAT BOY UP IN A HOME?!
WAP!
WHAT THE HELL'S ALL THE RACKET?! I'M MAKIN' MERRY, DAMMIT!! WHERE'S MY CHRISTMAS PUDDING, YOU FAT SOW?!
QUICKLY, CHILDREN, FETCH FATHER MORE GIN!
SMAK!
AND POVERTY TURNED THAT MAN INTO AN ABUSIVE DRUNK!

C'MERE, TIM. YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE THAT UNDERSTANDS ME.
DOD BESSUS EBEY UN!!
THAT'S RIGHT, SON! I LOVE YOOOOU, BOY!
DOD BESSUS EBEY UN!! DOD BESSUS EBEY UN!!
SNIFF! SNIFF! JESUS, BOY! IT SMELLS LIKE A COW [redacted] IN YER EAR!
I ENT POOO!!
JUST LOOK AT THAT TOUCHIN' SCENE!
YOU OUGHTA BE ASHAMED!
SMAK!


C'MON, DOPEY, KEEP UP!
FORGIVE ME, SPIRIT, BUT I SEE SOMETHING STRANGE, PROTRUDING FROM YOUR SKIRTS. IS IT A FOOT OR A CLAW!
THIS BOY IS IGNORANCE.
THIS BOY IS WANT.
YEP, I IS IGNORANCE!
AND I IS WANT!
WEREN'T YOU COLLECTING FOR THE POOR?
YEP, WE IS PULLIN' DOUBLE DUTY FOR 'IS BIT!
NORMALLY WE AIN'T THE LIKE TO GO 'OVERIN' UNDER THE ROBES OF SOME FELLA, BUT IT'S AWFUL WARM IN 'ERE!
HAVE THEY NO REFUGE OR RESOURCE?
ARE THERE NO SHOTGUN SHELLS? ARE THERE NO RIVERS?
YOU MEAN TO TURN MY OWN WORDS AGAINST ME.
NAH, I WAS JUST CONSIDERIN' SHOOTIN' YOU IN THE FACE AND DUMPIN' YER CARCASS IN THE DRINK!
WHAM!

SCROOGE LOOKED ABOUT HIM FOR THE GHOST, AND SAW IT NO MORE. AS THE LAST STROKE CEASED TO VIBRATE, HE REMEMBERED THE PREDICTION OF OLD JACOB MARLEY, AND BEHELD A SOLEMN PHANTOM, DRAPED AND HOODED, COMING, LIKE A MIST UPON THE GROUND, TOWARDS HIM.
THE PHANTOM SLOWLY, GRAVELY, SILENTLY APPROACHED. WHEN IT CAME NEAR HIM, SCROOGE BENT DOWN UPON HIS KNEE, FOR IN THE VERY AIR THROUGH WHICH THIS SPIRIT MOVED IT SEEMED TO SCATTER GLOOM AND MYSTERY.
YOU MANGY, MULE-LOVIN' BOIL ON THE ASS OF A SWINE!
I'LL FILL YER HIDE FULLA LEAD!
AHHH!

GA-AHH!!
YOU BETTER RUN, YOU SLIMY LITTLE VARMINT, YOU!
BLAM!
PAKOW!
OW!
AH-HA!! WINGED YA!!
OOF!
GASP!
NO, SPIRIT! OH NO, NO, SPIRIT! HEAR ME! I AM NOT THE MAN I WAS! I WILL BE THE MAN I MUST HAVE BEEN BUT FOR THIS! I WILL HONOR CHRISTMAS IN MY HEART, AND TRY TO KEEP IT ALL THE YEAR!
BLAM!


EEH! AAAH! ERRR! EEEH!
SOMEONE'S AT THE DOOR, MOTHER.
WHOEVER COULD IT BE?
KNOCK! KNOCK!
I'VE COME TO BRING YOU THIS CHRISTMAS TURKEY, GOOD LADY. MAY I COME IN?
MR. SCROOGE!
I'LL BE DANGED! BOY, LOOKIT THE SIZE OF THAT THING! YER ALL RIGHT, SCROOGE!
OH, FATHER, MAY I PLEASE CHEW THE GIZZARD?!
YOU CAN HAVE ALL THE GIZZARD YOU WANT, BOY!
WHY DON'T YOU SIT WITH DEAR UNCLE SCROOGE, TINY TIM!

NNNNN!!
SQUEAK!
O-OH--OH MY GOD! GET HIM OFF ME! GET HIM OFF ME!!
WHAT IS THIS?! I WAS TOLD THIS WAS GOING TO BE A LEGITIMATE THEATRICAL PRODUCTION! I'VE BEEN BEATEN, ABUSED, BLUDGEONED, SHOT, AND NOW A MENTALLY DEFICIENT TINY TIM JUST TOOK A CRAP ON MY LEG!
AHHHH.
SAY, YOU CALL THAT A CHRISTMAS SPECIAL? THERE'S NO CHRISTMAS SPIRIT HERE!
THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT IS IN JOE'S HOUSE, THAT'S RIGHT NEXT TO YOURS, AND IN THE KENNEDYS' HOUSE, AND MRS. MAKELIN'S HOUSE, AND A HUNDRED OTHERS! YOU'RE LENDING THEM THE MONEY TO BUILD AND THEY'RE GONNA PAY IT BACK THE BEST THEY CAN! WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO? FORECLOSE ON THEM?
I'VE GOT TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY-TWO DOLLARS IN HERE AND TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY-TWO DOLLARS ISN'T GOING TO BREAK ANYONE!
OKAY, TOM. ALL RIGHT. SIGN THIS AND YOU'LL GET YOUR MONEY IN SIXTY DAYS.
ZUZU!
SIXTY DAYS?!

HAPPY HOLIDAYS, FOLKS!

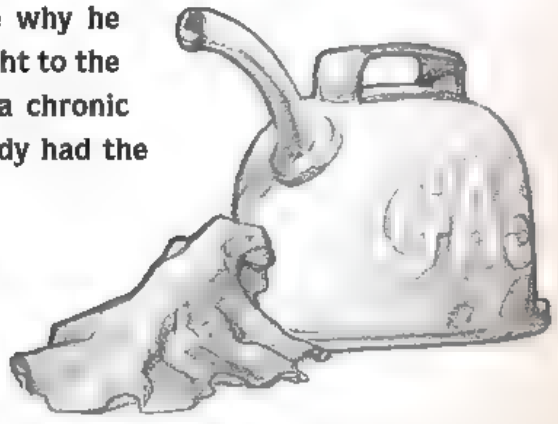
Jimmy Turtle and the Legendary Boxcar of Well Made Ladies Shoes

by Franky

(Transcribed by Thomas Lennon)

I first heard about the legendary boxcar of well-made ladies shoes from a man who'd traveled amongst the boxcar hobos in their environs: Jimmy Turtle. Jimmy wasn't a hobo himself, but he was a chronic gasoline-rag huffer who had to move around a lot on account of a short con he'd run called "A Harp for the Lady."

This was one of Jimmy's best short cons. It worked like this: he'd arrive at the door of a spinster, dressed to the nines, and produce a catalogue of the finest harps made in Europe. He'd talk up the benefits of a harp in the home, get her to lay down some serious cabbage, then knock her over the head with a rock.



This was Jimmy's style. I was never sure why he didn't just skip the harp stuff and go straight to the rock, but he was a man of intrigue, and a chronic gasoline huffer. Maybe it's 'cause he already had the harp catalogue. Maybe it was just habit.

When I met Jimmy, he was in the middle of a nine-week huff bender, living in a roll of carpeting on Tresdale Avenue. I didn't know he was even in there 'til I took it home and started beatin' the carpet with a pipe. Out tumbles Jimmy, and we been friends since that day. It's also how come his left eye don't work right.

At first I thought we wouldn't be pals, but, as he emerged from his gas-rag haze, I could see that he was one of the most vicious sons a' bitches I ever met.

Jimmy bunked up with me 'til he could get back on his feet. It's hard to stand when you've been on the business end of a gas-soaked rag for nine weeks.

Pretty soon, Jimmy and I were running short and long cons together. Our best one was called "Parson and the Out-of-Town Gentleman." In this one, I played the Parson, while Jimmy was the Out-of-Town Gentleman. I'd work the bus depot,

in a full Parson get-up. I'd make like I was lost, ask a good samaritan for bus fare to Kansas, then Jimmy would saunter up—dressed to the nines—and hit 'em with a rock.

One night over ham-cake and beans, Jimmy got to telling me about his days amongst the hobos.

"Them filthy bindle toters?" I says.

"The same," says Jimmy. "You ever heard about the legendary boxcar of well-made ladies shoes? A king's ransom in ladies shoes. Upwards of eight hundred dollars, some say."

"You're full of it," I says.

"No, it's true," says Jimmy.

"Liar!" I says. And then I hit him with my good bean pan, and he passed out for about a day.

We kept up "Parson and the Out-of-Town Gentleman" at the depot until the station dick got wise. All the while, I was thinking about what Jimmy said about these well-made shoes, and the kind of cabbage they might be worth to a fella that could get his hands on 'em (apparently eight hundred bucks). One afternoon when we had some free time in the cooler, I asked him about it again.

"So, you been to this boxcar?" I says.

"I ain't seen it," says Jimmy, "but I seen a map once. Belonged to a hobo named Hobo John."

A voice chimed in, "You two taking that box car full of shoes? It's hooey. I've heard the stories, too."

I turned and laid eyes on the ugliest spider I think I ever seen.

(This was before I was pals with Spider. He'd been pinched for a little misunderstanding that the Feds were calling kidnapping. It was a fake kidnapping, but once Spider and Charlie Noodles got nabbed—Charlie panicked, and didn't cop to the fact that he was a voluntary hostage. They'd planned on making a quick fifty from Charlie's uncle. Spider took the rap, pulled a short stint. Charlie made it up to him later by cutting him in on a half gross of orchids he'd boosted. Charlie's good people, ask anybody.)

Back to where I was:

"You're full of it!" I says to Jimmy as I broad-sided him with my shoe, as I didn't have a rock or my good bean pan.

That night, in the bunk under Spider, I had a dream. In the dream, I was sitting atop a mountain of well-made ladies shoes, and tiny little centaur people were worshipping me like a sultan, bringin' me cakes and splendid things.

I'm not sure what the centaur people meant, but I knew the other part was the hand of fate, telling me I had to get my mitts on these well-made shoes.

We got bounced in the morning, and we decided to set out in search of the legendary boxcar. I laid down two bits for an apple pie at Smeagle's and went out chumming for Hobo John.

The plan was to make nice with him by way of the pie, acquire the map, and then: rock to the head. The "make nice" part was plan A. Plan B *started* with the rock, and didn't involve making nice at all. In plan B, the pie would be consumed by us, in celebration of acquiring the map.

We headed to the train yard, which shoulda been lousy with hobos, but there was a particularly rough-lookin' Bull on patrol, and his billy club looked like it had played extra innings on the skulls of the hobo population. So we scrammed over to the spot behind the bridge with the broken sewer pipe that they call Hobo Falls.

A couple of winos were cookin' what used to be a cat on a spit—but no hobos. Jimmy let 'em have it with a rock until he got one of 'em to talking. (The wino was actually trying to talk the whole time, but when Jimmy was havin' at it with a rock, he was a regular John Henry.)

"Ain't you heard?" said the Li'lest Wino, through the blood and what was left of his teeth, "the hobos have all moved deep into the woods."

"The Hobo Jungul, they calls it," said a Slightly Larger Wino. "They're worshipping the Hobo King and livin' on the flesh of men."

If I had a nickel for every time somebody told me that something I was lookin' for was "holed up in the woods, livin' on the flesh of men," I'd be living in a palace made of rubies and candy.

"What about Hobo John?" I says.

"I'm Hobo John," says the Li'lest Wino.

"No you ain't, you's a wino," says Jimmy.

"I am now," says the Li'lest Wino (who now let's call Wino John).

"They call me Wino John now, on account of I ain't a hobo no more. You see a bindle on my shoulder?" he says.

He didn't have no bindle, and he was covered in his own filth and spilled hooch, and he was cookin' up a cat for lunch—solid wino credentials.

"Make with the map, Hobo John," I says.

"Wino John ... I just told you two seconds ago ..."

SCHRA-CRACK! Jimmy went with plan B to the head.

While the former Hobo John was taking a dirt nap, we shook 'em down. Sure enough, in his shoe, was a folded piece of paper with a crude drawing. It smelled like wino foot, but to me, it smelled like eight hundred clams worth of well-made shoes. And a little bit like wino foot.

The map had no words or names—most hobos can't hardly write for snot. But the pictures was pretty distinct:

1. A path leading Southeast from the Decaster place two miles into underbrush and a grove of elm trees.

2. A large elm, with branches that form what looks like an Indian Chief in profile, smoking a pipe.

3. A fork in the path, veering left with seventy-five paces marked out.

4. A double-headed dog, like the one they says guards the gate to hell.

5. A boxcar.

This was it—the legendary boxcar! The only thing that made me nervous was number 4, the double-headed dog, like the one they says guards the gates to hell. A couple a questions popped through my head:

Was this dog as big as it looked in the drawing?

Were those human skulls or animal skulls littered around its feet?

Did it for sure only have TWO heads, or did the drawer of the map just run outta steam and not draw *all* the heads?

Two headed hell dog—fine, I'm in. But start addin' heads, and the smart money starts movin' into the hell dog corner.

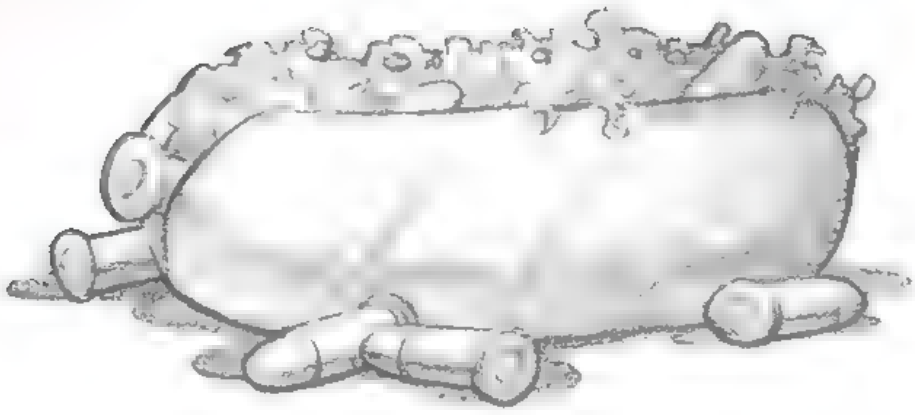
We went back to Norton's and started making plans. We knew we needed a couple of things: rope, a good flashlight, and anything that might kill a double-headed dog from the gates of hell. My thought on this was bullets.

Jimmy said regular bullets wouldn't do no good. If the dog had dug itself up from gates of hell, we'd need bullets that'd been blessed by a holy man. If it was just a mutated earth dog from a freak show, say, we'd just want something big gauge—something that could put a nice-sized window in it.

We decided to kill both birds with one stone and get our hands on some .45 shells with some holy elbow grease on 'em. The only catch was: how was we gonna get a holy man to bless our large gauge bullets. Killing things is often the sort of deal holy-types frown upon.

"We'll disguise the bullets as somethin' harmless. Somethin' that you wouldn't think twice about blessin'," I says. "Like frankfurters."

We picked up a half dozen frankfurter buns a Smeagle's, and loaded 'em up with our .45 shells. Then we covered the shells with kraut and relish. They looked pretty good.



We took 'em down to Our Lady of Persistent Sorrow. Father O'Brien was pitchin' pennies out back with Stella Johannsen's crippled brother Fred. Fred was good people, and everybody cut him slack on account of him being only a torso and head. I still feel bad about what was about to happen to him in a couple of seconds.

"Hey, Padre," I says, "how 'bout givin' a little blessing to these frankfurters Jimmy and I are about to eat?"

"Wait, you want me to bless frankfurters?" says the Padre with a suspicious-type look.

"Yeah—give 'em a little Hail Mary or something," I says.

"Somethin' to drive the devil out," says Jimmy, "something strong."

And now Padre O'Brien gets a real cross-eyed look, like we're speaking Swahili. And here's where things turned terrible for Stella Johannsen's crippled brother Fred.

"Looks like you've got an awful lot of frankfurters there, Francis," says the Padre, "more than two healthy boys can manage. How about donating one of those to God's humble servant?"

I was about to call it off, but it was too late: the thing that turns out so horrible for Fred Johannsen happened right then.

The Padre reaches out and takes one a Jimmy's frankfurters, and before you can say: "Wait, Padre, them wiener buns is fulla bullets," he bites in. BLAM!

His chompers musta hit right at the casing, 'cause next thing I know, Fred Johannsen is spoutin' blood like a maimed dolphin. I drop my frankfurters to help, but they must'a hit the pavement hard, 'cause two more rounds went off, creatin' a fountain of blood, relish, and kraut.

When the smoke cleared, Jimmy, the Padre, and myself were still standing. Fred Johanssen had taken four rounds to the face.

"That's impossible," I says. "I only heard three shots."

The Padre held up his hand—it was wrapped around a smoking .38 with a mother of pearl handle.

"Instinct," he says. "I'm a Jesuit."

The Padre lifted his tunic and slipped the .38 back into his ankle holster. We checked to see if Fred was alive, and tragically, he was.

(The rest of the Fred Johanssen story is for another day. He lived, but it suffices to say that with no limbs and four slugs in his kisser, he never ran for public office. Things was aggravated by the fact that three of the slugs was .45, one was .38, giving the scars a kinda uneven look, as if a dimwitted child had made a gingerbread man face right above Fred's own face. Later he grew a moustache to draw attention away from the bullet holes, but he ended up just looking like the guy Captain Weirdo fights in the one where he goes to the planet of the Potato Men.)

We got Fred patched up, and the Padre pulled us into his office. He wanted answers to a bunch of questions: Why were we trying to feed him bullets? This sorta thing. Yadda yadda.

We spilled our guts about the legendary boxcar, the well-made shoes—the whole caper. The Padre took a long look at us.

"I want in," he says.

"No dice," I says.

"Wait, Franky," says Jimmy, "if this dog with multiple heads is from hell, the Padre's exactly the kind of fella we want in our corner."

"Fine," I says, "but two conditions. The Padre's cut of the well-made shoes is fifteen percent or seventy-five pairs, whichever is less."

"Fine. What's the other?" says the Padre.

"Once the caper's over, we don't see each other for while. We divide the footwear, then until things cool off—we ain't friends, got it?"

"We're not friends now, Francis. I hardly know you, and what I know I don't like.

All I know is you're friends with The Goon." says the Padre.

"Good, then we won't have to practice avoidin' each other," I says.

We washed the kraut and relish off the rest of our ammo, and the Padre doused it all with water from a holy jar. Just for good measure he splashed a little on the rope and the flashlight, too.

The Padre insisted that we bow our heads, and pray for the success of the caper, and if possible, that Fred Johanssen would quietly die in his sleep that night, and not have to live the rest of his life as a bullet-riddled head and torso (which, as you know, he did).

It was around midnight when we set out for the Decaster place in the Padre's Packard. We pulled it off the road and covered the car with bramble brush so as to avoid suspicious lookie-loos. A couple lights were on in the Decaster place, and it sounded like somebody was sawing up a bathtub inside.

We scoured around in the brush 'til we found what looked sorta like it used to be a path. Jimmy was gettin' edgy. He'd been off the huff for a while now, and it didn't seem like reality was sittin' too well with him. He was twirlin' the flashlight real nervous like.

"You ever wonder how the boxcar woulda got all the way down here, Franky?" Jimmy asked, with a kinda jitter in his voice.

"Easy. A runaway. The Eastern Pacific used to run right along that ridge," I says, noddin' to the cliff above us. "Musta jumped the track just before the state line."

I was just startin' to think how hungry I was, and how I wish I'd kept a couple of them Smeagle's buns, when the ground beneath us trembled and a dog just like the one on the map came runnin' down the path. The head count was just right: two. His eyes were blazing with blue fire, and his cold breath felt like seein' a picture of somebody havin' a luau on your grave.

The details of what happened next differ depending on if you ask me or Jimmy what happened. My version is this: the left head is the one that devoured the Padre in two bites. I fired off three shots into the heart of the hell dog. The hell dog caught fire with the power of the holy bullets,

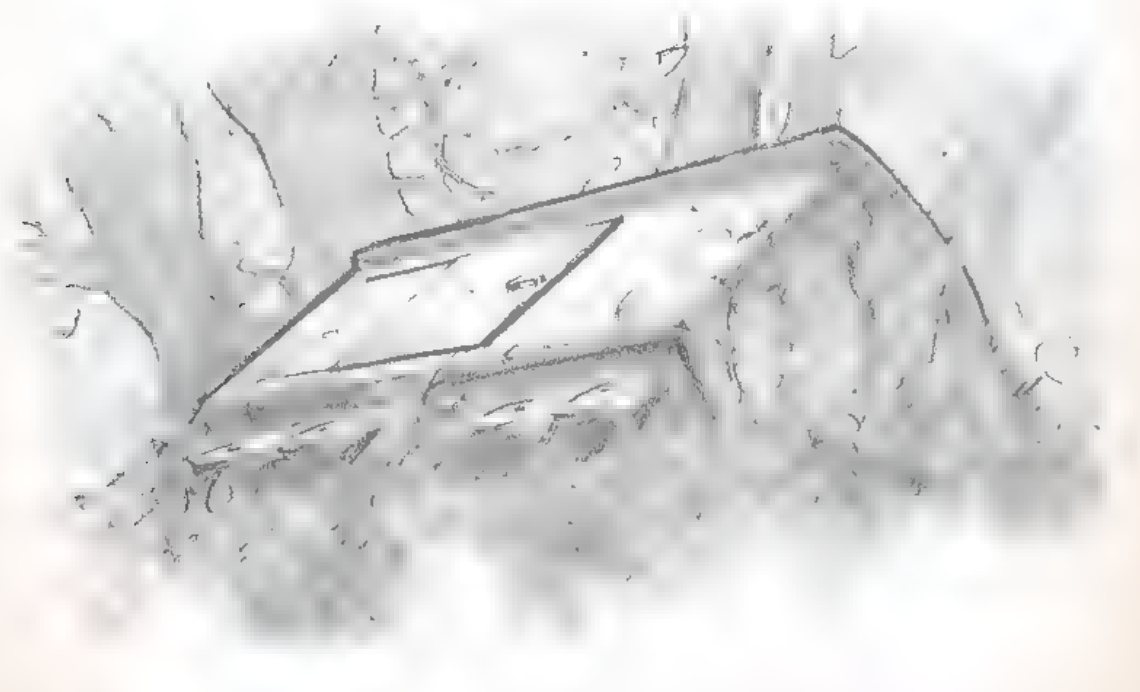
growled with the voices of a thousand tortured souls, and then was sucked into a vortex, presumably back into hell.

Jimmy's version (which is wrong), goes like this: the dog comes runnin' up with the blue fire and whatnot. I panic and accidentally fire three shots into the Padre, who's then eaten (already dead) in two bites by the hell dog's right head. The dog catches fire, yadda yadda, and then hell vortex and whatnot.

In Jimmy's version, apparently EATING some holy bullets that are already inside a guy are enough to suck a dog back into hell. His version don't wash with me, and it's NOT the way it happened.

So, when the vortex cleared, we were down one Padre, but also down one hell dog, making the score about even. Our take of the shoes just shot up by fifteen percent, and there was a Packard in the bramble with no owner and the keys under the mat. Things were looking good.

This is when we should have turned back to Norton's for whiskey and pie in the late Padre's free Packard. But instead, we continued inching our way through the fog



and the tangled vines, with the sound of human or possibly animal skulls crunching beneath our feet.

We reached the deepest, darkest part of the gulley, and sure enough: the boxcar was there. It was lying on its side. The foliage had grown around it, making it look like some kinda jungle temple. We threw the rope over, and Jimmy hoisted me up top, to where the side door was (now it was more like the roof).

I started tuggin' on the door but it wouldn't do no good—the rust had sealed it shut. I fired off two rounds into the hinges, and the door popped off and fell inside the boxcar. Jimmy tossed up the flashlight and I shined it into the belly of the car.

(I now have one bullet, which will be important in a couple seconds.)

There was shoes alright. Hundreds of 'em. It was hard to tell how well-made they were, but they didn't look cheap, that's for sure. Even if they were pretty well-made, I was lookin' at a lot more than eight hundred clams worth of shoes. Maybe double that.

I jumped down in. The plan was that I'd toss 'em out to Jimmy, who would stack 'em, then we'd divide 'em up, based on quality and design.

As soon as I landed down in the shoes, I felt an awful chill crawl down my spine. That feeling got worse when I could see that something was moving under the shoes. Without waitin', I fired off my last holy bullet at whatever it was. But I musta missed, 'cause there was a rustling and then a thing that still haunts me to this day pulled itself up from the ladies shoes.

He was a hobo. Or he used to be. He looked more like what would happen if you sucked the air out of a hobo, dipped him in acid, then put the leftover bones and sinews back into his clothes and somehow stood him up. His eyes hung a couple inches out of their sockets like jingle bells. His cheeks had rotted away, so his tongue hung to one side. My flashlight shined right through his gelatinous body, casting a shadow of his skeleton on the wall behind him. He reached our his boney fingers at me.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me, Edgar," he said in the kind of voice you have when your cheeks have rotted away.

This was right about when I wished The Goon was with me and this undead hobo. He loves this sort of thing.

"I've been waiting ... just like we planned," he says, "I stowed away and you were supposed to let me out when the train passed the state line, then we'd divide the shoes. That was the plan. How did you forget me this long? It's been so long, I had to eat whatever I could to survive."

I looked down, and sure enough—the undead ghost hobo had chewed off his own feet, he walked towards me on his pointy shin bones like some kind of horror flamingo.

"Imagine, eating your feet while trapped in a treasure trove of shoes," he says to me, as he's gettin' closer and closer, "I think the irony may have made me crazy, Edgar."

"Look pal," I says, "I ain't this Edgar who left you to rot in here. You got the wrong guy. I wasn't never in on your caper." But he wasn't listening, and his danglin' eyeballs were lookin' at my feet.

"I held up my end of the deal," he says, pulling out a huge rusty hobo fork, "but you didn't. Now I'll watch you eat your feet and then we'll be square."

At this point I really wished I had a couple more bullets.

"What's the hold up?" I hear Jimmy holler from up above.

Jimmy was lookin' right down at me, but on account of I pointed the flashlight up, he couldn't see the undead footless hobo who was about to cut my feet off as part of some kinda vengeance for an earlier failed plan to boost these same shoes.

"Toss me your heater!" I says to Jimmy, "Slackjaw hobo!"

"What?" says Jimmy, wasting valuable seconds that we would never get back.

Those seconds were just the time it took for googlie-eyes to pounce and plant that rusty fork in my ankle. I fall backwards and start spoutin' blood. The undead hobo's hackin' away at my feet, while his pointy shin bone stubs poke at my face like pool cues. I'm hammerin' at the side of his head with the butt of my .45, but all that's managing to do is push some of his brains out his left ear—which ain't slowing him down one bit.

From experience, I know that I need to calm down, get his heart away from the rest of his body, and bury it. It sounds easy, but this is a tall order when you're pinned and your adrenaline's kicking in.

Up above, Jimmy decides to start shooting.

Bullets in a contained metal box have a tendency to bounce around a whole bunch, and that's exactly what happened. The boxcar became a sort of popcorn machine, in which somebody had replaced the kernels with a whole bunch of bullets. This didn't help me too much.

With everything I had, I kicked the hobo's head. With a click, the head flew off, which was just the opening I was looking for.

(Zombies have for their heads a fascination along the lines of cats and yarn. Understandably, if you can be separated from your head and still be alive, you're gonna want to get it back ASAP.)

Jimmy threw the rope down and hoisted me up while the hobo head and the body scrambled for each other like blind man's bluff.

Me and Jimmy ran like squirrels back to the Packard.

As we drove back into town, we vowed never to return to that fateful boxcar (a vow that we honored for almost three weeks).

The next night at Norton's I was telling the story to The Goon, but I could tell he had something else on his mind that was eatin' him up. Jimmy couldn't believe that I'd made it up the rope without catching any lead. Later that night, I checked, and sure enough—I had. There was three bullets lodged in my leg and part of my back. I guess in all the brouhaha I just hadn't noticed. They're still there to this day. I don't feel 'em unless it rains a lot, then they get kinda itchy. I don't know if the holy elbow grease on 'em had some kind of magic effect, or if they just didn't hit any major arteries.

I like to think they're lucky. Maybe they is, maybe they ain't. Maybe they're what kept me on the sunny side of the dirt the time that me and Charlie Noodles had to set fire to that Spanish ghost ship.

But that is a story for another day.

EMPIRE